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# A T T H E WELL-SIDE

— BY —

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AT THE WELL-SIDE



## AT THE WELL-SIDE.

*A Study in John iv: 1-42.*

### I.

JESUS is journeying from Judea northward to Galilee. He must needs pass through Samaria on the way. He is journeying afoot. Behold, the Son of Man! Though rich, yet for our sakes He became poor. He humbled Himself to become a dust-soiled traveller on the highways of our earth. Is it not remarkable that in our Lord's much journeying during His three years of laborious ministry we never once read of His travelling by chariot nor by any other wheeled vehicle, neither by horseback nor by camel! True, we once read of His entering Jerusalem riding on a colt, the foal of an ass. But you will recall that that was but a momentary act and was not for convenience sake, nor in the way of journeying.

Take, too, the striking picture we here have of the reality of Christ's human nature. Walking for hours under a hot

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oriental sun, he grew weary. And about the noon hour,\* coming to a wayside well, as we read, "being wearied with His journey He sat thus on the well." And besides fatigue, He thirsted. And so—

" Just such as I this earth He trod  
With every human ill but sin,  
And tho' indeed the very God,  
As I am now, so He has been."

He is sitting alone beside the well, the disciples having gone into the city to buy food. While He is quietly waiting, there comes a certain Samaritan woman, with her pitcher and the long cord attached, to draw water from the well. Jesus said to her, "Give me to drink." Is there any other instance in the records of our Saviour's ministry of his making request for temporal favor for himself?†

The Lord now in His glory thirsts no more, but are we not still hearing, as if from His own lips, the same gentle appeal?

\*I prefer to understand "the sixth hour" according to the Jewish computation rather than according to the Roman, which would make it six o'clock in the evening.

†His cry on the cross, "I thirst," I separate from his active ministry.

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For so does He identify Himself with His needy ones on earth that in the piteous cries that come for our aid we can catch His voice, "Give me to drink"; and even the cup of cold water given in His name shall not lose its reward, for "inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren ye have done it unto me." And especially in every appeal to our benevolence and our cooperation in the work of His gospel, struggling under the noon-day heat of difficulty and opposition, should we hear the Lord himself saying, "Give me to drink." Do not think when such objects are brought before you that you are giving merely to the machinery of Mission Boards and Societies, or to the schemes of merely human interest. Your giving terminates on a higher object. It is the great Captain of our salvation calling to you, "Give *me* to drink!"

To ask a drink of water was a simple request, and one which, in that warm climate especially, was seldom refused. Under ordinary circumstances no doubt the woman would have instantly complied, without any disposition to question or cavil. But observing, probably from His garb and dialect,

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that the stranger before her was a Jew, and knowing of the strained relations between Jews and Samaritans, she assumes an air of surprise that *He* should ask of *her* even so trifling a courtesy as a drink of water. For the Jews, says the Evangelist in a note of parenthesis, "have no dealings with the Samaritans." This was a sad race fact. The history of the alienation was this: After the ten tribes, constituting the Northern Kingdom, had been carried into captivity, some seven hundred years before, the land (which took the name Samaria from the city which had previously been the capital of the kingdom) was repopled by a motley population made up of heathen colonies from different countries, a sprinkling of fugitive Jews from the land of Judah, together with fragments, here and there, of the former ten tribes of Israel. Subsequently, when the Jews were returning from their captivity in Babylon (more than two hundred years after the overthrow of the Northern tribes), and began to rebuild at Jerusalem, the Samaritans proposed cooperation and union with them. But the proposition was refused, and no alliance with the tainted, mongrel

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race would be allowed. This aroused deep resentment on the part of the Samaritans, which grew and was intensified in the course of centuries. In opposition to the Jews, they set up a religious system of their own,—partly heathen and partly that of Israel. They took the five books of Moses, and held to the expectation of a Messiah to come, but rejected the rest of the Scriptures; they acknowledged God, but also observed certain idolatrous practices. As the writer in Second Kings described it, “They feared the Lord and served their own gods.” Within their bounds stood the historic Mount Gerizim. For this mountain they claimed a sanctity greater than that which attached to Mount Zion. On it they built a temple, and instituted ceremonies of worship to rival those of Jerusalem.

This bitter animosity of the Samaritans was met by the feeling, equally strong, of hatred, scorn and contempt on the part of the Jews. It was said a Jew would not eat out of the same dish with a Samaritan, nor drink from the same cup. They made the very name a term of reproach. So that the Jews, on one occasion, wishing to revile

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Jesus, and to concentrate in one word their feeling of scorn, flung at Him as the most opprobrious epithet in their vocabulary, "Thou art a Samaritan!" Hence, perhaps, it is not so strange that this woman, with the sense of the old race prejudice, and knowing nothing of the man before her save His nationality, should follow the course she did, and instead of instantly granting the request, should begin to parley and to raise questions in "a sort of playful triumph," as Alford understands it—"What, you! a member of the proud and scornful Jewish race who look down on us, do you ask drink of me, a woman of Samaria!"

Jesus, Jew though He was, was of course above this low and wicked prejudice of His nation. He never spoke disparagingly of the Samaritans, and exhibitions of rancor towards them on the part of His disciples He rebuked—"Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of." He had already sent His disciples out into the neighborhood to buy Samaritan food. At another time He directed them to go to a certain village of the Samaritans "to make ready for His coming," although, as it proved, the people



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inhospitably refused to receive Him. In the case of the ten lepers who were healed, He commended the one who "returned to give glory to God," and of whom it is said, "he was a Samaritan." And in His story of the poor traveller stripped and robbed and left half dead on the way, we have the Lord's beautiful tribute to "a certain Samaritan" who kindly cared for the sufferer when the Jewish priest and the Jewish Levite had passed by on the other side without raising a finger in help. And for all time will that tender injunction, which bids us "go and do likewise," be associated with the merciful deed, and will perpetuate the example, of that man of a despised race.

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### II.

The woman's reply, ungracious though it was, gives opportunity for that which Jesus always relished more than His necessary food. As at another time He had greater interest in teaching Mary, as she sat at His feet, than He could feel in Martha's labored preparation for His entertainment at her table, so now He forgets He is thirsty, and He forgets He is tired, in the opportunity which offers of imparting spiritual drink to a perishing soul. His own sense of bodily need is lost in the thought of her spiritual need, and instead of renewing His request for water, He illustrates that His meat and His drink was rather to do the will of Him that sent him. For,

"Sweeter, O Lord, than rest to Thee  
When seated by the well,  
Was the blest work which brought Thee there  
Of grace and peace to tell."

By means of the well and the water, as figures, He would lift the woman's thoughts to something higher than bodily cravings.

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The subject between them was a matter of giving. And He, asking a favor at her hands, has at that very moment the power, yea, the disposition, to bestow a greater gift than He asks. And in that compassion and patience which He ever had towards "the ignorant and them that are out of the way," He now addresses her, in effect:—"Oh, woman, if you only knew the gift of God, and if you only knew who it is that has said to you 'give me to drink,' the relations between us would be quite changed. You would have been asking of him, and he without any parley, and without any delay, would have given unto you living water."\*

\*By some the gift of God is understood to mean the Holy Spirit, and to correspond to the "living water" of the next clause—water being a frequent Bible symbol of the Holy Spirit's influence. By others the gift of God is understood as referring to Christ himself—God's gracious gift to the world, and likened to the water described as "living" in the sense of being real, or true, and perennial in its influence. I see no reason for any exclusive interpretation. Both are comprehended in the one general thought that God freely forgives sin and satisfies the desire of every needy soul that seeks. The gift and the Giver were at hand; "the kingdom of God was come nigh" unto the woman. And as the Saviour in his omniscience read her sinful life in advance of the interview, may we not also understand it was in exercise of his divine foreknowledge that, putting emphasis on the "*thou*," he could declare beforehand that when she should know this truth she would be ready to ask.

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The woman's spiritual sense is very dull, and she does not comprehend Christ's reference to the living water, even as afterwards to the Jews His allusion to the living bread seemed like words in an unknown tongue. She knows of no other water than that which slakes bodily thirst. "You cannot give me water from this well," she says, "for it is very deep and you have nothing to draw with. From whence then hast thou that living water? Or, are you boasting of some other spring or fountain with better water than this?" Emphasizing whatever remote or slight connection her nation had with the ancient covenanted Israel, she represents His words, as if a depreciation of the well so long hallowed among her people. "Why, our father Jacob gave us this well, and he used to drink from it himself, and his children also and his cattle. Art thou greater than our father Jacob," she asks in a half-resentful tone, and as with an injured air, "that you presume to speak of a better water?" Jesus in return makes no question of the excellent quality of this water. Had He not, indeed, already asked to drink of it at her hands? But without any disparage-

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ment, and allowing all that is claimed for Jacob's well, it must yet be acknowledged, He gently declares, even by those who had enjoyed its friendly service their whole life long, that drinking of its water you will thirst again. You fill your pitcher to-day, but to-morrow you must journey hither again for a new supply. And so it is continually. Whereas, "he who drinks of the water that I give shall never thirst, for the water that I shall give him will be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life."

The woman is puzzled but is evidently becoming interested. There is that in the novel and singular announcement the stranger makes that awakens mental interest, even though she does not fully catch His meaning. And with a vague conception of it, as something exalted, and in a half-serious and half-bantering way, she says, "Oh, if that is so, then give me of that wonderful water!" This was spoken in that same misapprehending spirit and indifferent tone with which the Jews once responded when Jesus was discoursing about the bread which cometh down from heaven, "Lord,

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evermore give us this bread." The woman thought of her years of toil over the water supply: coming from her home with the large earthen pitcher; letting it down into the well and laboriously drawing it up; raising the heavy load to her shoulder, or to her head, and slowly trudging home, and then the supply so soon exhausted, and again the weary trip! "Oh, yes," says she—still thinking of the water of earth, "give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw."\*

Not knowing clearly what she had done, yet in some sense the woman has asked for the living water. And Jesus would now give her to drink. But the Lord knew the woman's sinful life, and her dormant conscience. And He who was quick to heal must first make sore. There must be a preparatory work, an awakening touch, and the woman must herself see her sin and realize her need, and feel a thirst after righteousness. Had He not told her that the living water meant another well, a well within, springing up into everlasting life? Thus, first, a well must be dug, as it were, in her

\*"Neither come all the way hither to draw," R. V.; her village supposed to be nearly a mile away.

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heart; a hidden spring down in the depths must be reached. The shaft of truth must be sunk through the surface, must pierce through the layers of transgression, through the thick incrustings of sinful years, through the deposits of carnality, through the hard and stony strata. "Go, call thy husband and come hither." This was the first stroke of the pick in digging the new well.

The word, husband, must have had an ominous sound for the woman. It did not go well in connection with her life. We imagine her confused and embarrassed for a moment, and her eyes perhaps turned to the ground. But we imagine her soon rallying and raising her head. This Jewish stranger, having no dealings with Samaritans and never before in our village—what does he know about my life? My secret is safe. And so she nonchalantly answers, "I have no husband." But the first stroke bounding off, another is ready. Jesus takes her up right there and unveils her sinful life,—"*Thou hast well said, I have no husband, for thou hast had five husbands and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband; in that saidst thou truly.*" This was the

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second piercing, deep and far reaching. It came without warning and it went home to the woman. Her sin has found her out; and all things are naked and open unto the eyes of Him with whom she now has to do. Her own heart condemns her. And what a flood of recollections was this convicting charge fitted to awaken!—the early days when she was a pure girl, then the honorable love of maidenhood and the heart's plighted troth, then the mournful days when, either by death five times made a widow or, as is more probable, in some of these cases at least, the sacred bonds of marriage broken by her sin, and now her present life of shame! Oh, how "sharper than any two edged sword was this word of the Lord piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit and of the joints and marrow." Reading between the lines I see here an awakened sense of sin, the beginnings of penitential sorrow and a thought of God which troubled her soul. For, observe the marked change at once in her whole attitude towards the mysterious stranger who thus deals with her, who searches her and knows her, who understands her thought afar off,



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and who is acquainted with all her ways. Such knowledge is too wonderful for her, and her spirit bows before Him. She had first thought of Him, indifferently, as an ordinary man, a common wayfarer passing by on his wearisome journeying, and one who commended himself the less because he was a Jew. But how altered now her whole bearing towards him! How different the spirit she exhibits! Her bold and presumptuous manner is gone, and in its place we see respect and deference. A little before she had said with a supercilious and almost insolent air, "Art thou greater than our father Jacob?" and now she acknowledges in effect, Yes, here is one indeed who is greater than the patriarch Jacob; one who enters her inner life and who reads the pages of her shameful history, and before whom she cannot dissemble, nor cloak her sin. A new light in regard to him breaks on her mind. She is conscious that she had been woefully misjudging him; that, unaware of the fact, she had been conversing with some exalted personage, and had spoken "unadvisedly with her lips." And though knowing not who the stranger may be, she yet

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most deferentially acknowledges this much at least, "Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet!"

A prophet, in the Bible sense, was a teacher—but much more than a mere teacher. He was a teacher so marked by striking signs as to show that in a special sense he was accredited by God and spoke for Him. And just as Nicodemus said to Christ, "No man can do these miracles that thou doest except God be with him," so this woman reasoned—no man, an entire stranger here, can so read my life, and pierce to its depths, and show me my sin, except God be with him!

This being her sense of sin and the awakening within her of a spirit of anxious concern, is one disappointed by the character of the question she straightway puts? "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain (pointing as she spoke to lofty Mount Gerizim which towered high above them)—our fathers worshipped there, but you Jews say Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship. Now tell me, which is the right place?" Does this seem too abstract and impersonal a matter for an awakened sin-

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ner to trouble herself about? Does it savor of mere curiosity, or of captious controversy as between the rival seats of worship? But remember that up to this time, both among Jews and Samaritans, the approach of the soul before God was associated with some particular locality, with some temple, with ritual, with a priesthood which asserted an exclusive claim. And hence to come before Him one must first be assured of the right locality where God was thought to dwell, and the right altar whence the smoke of His offerings must arise. And so, after all, it was the woman's yearning which led to her question. She would know where God's true altar stood, that she might bring hither her offerings and her desires, and hers was in reality the same state of mind as Job's when he cried, "Oh, that I knew where I might find Him! that I might come even to His seat!"

To this question, how else could Christ make answer than as He did—He who had come to do away with what had been only local and national and temporary in religion,

\* That it indicates a desire to divert the conversation from the close and practical turn it had taken, I do not now suppose.

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and to inaugurate the dispensation of the spiritual? And how better would He instruct and encourage one, just beginning to respond to these movements on the soul! "Woman," said He, impressively, "believe me, the hour comes and now is when, whether a Samaritan or a Jew, men shall worship the Father without respect to place; when you shall be restricted neither to this mountain nor yet to Jerusalem." This truth was only that moment dawning. It was not a teaching from the past, but "the hour cometh"—was only just now at hand—when this new order of things was to be established to the wonder and amazement, not alone of the Samaritan woman, and of the Jews, but of the chosen disciples as well—so infixed and rooted had been the old conception. All localities where the sincere worship of the soul would express itself would have equal sanctity; and distinctions, not of place only but of nations and persons, would be abolished. Salvation was indeed "of the Jews," through their Scriptures and prophets, and by their whole training as a theocratic nation; but it was not to be subject to Jewish limitations and boundaries.

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And not only was God now to be more generally known, but better known. To the poor woman, conscience-stricken and dimly seeking, and to all whose hearts sincerely cry after him, this teacher at the well-side reveals God as the Father, with all the "sufficing" power of that name, the tender title coming again and yet again in these words of gracious instruction. It is not so much the place where you worship as the Being to whom you would look, Jesus tells her. God is spirit and is to be spiritually apprehended. Your approach to Him is to be determined, not by locality or clime, nor by any exclusive channels of ritual, but by your own spirit in its attitude of faith and desire. So that here at this well-side, or at your home in the village, or wherever you may be, only in sincerity of heart, in "spirit and in truth," call upon God and you will find Him near. Yea, not only may God be found in whatsoever place the soul sincerely seeks Him, but more than that—"such worshippers God the Father seeks." He goes out to find the lost, and to meet those whose groping steps and whose panting hearts are towards Him.

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### III.

All this is familiar and commonplace truth now, but not so then. It was something not only novel, but startling and revolutionary to the woman's mind. The great Mount Gerizim to which she had pointed, the rival of the Jews' Mount Zion, she had always heard was the most sacred spot on earth. Their people had been taught in legends and myths that it was the seat of the early paradise, that Adam had been formed out of its dust, that its summit was the one spot untouched by the waters of the flood, that the altar on which Abraham bound Isaac had been built there, and that there was to be seen the stone on which Jacob pillowed his head when he dreamed and saw the ladder. Thus had the mountain of Samaria always stood in her mind as the one place of worship. And now can she at once change her whole point of view? Can she accept off-hand this new teaching? She is perplexed. She hesitates. She is in the right frame of mind. She is docile and wants the truth and is ready to receive it, if

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only assured of its right source. The stranger before her she knows is wise. She takes teachings from his lips in all docility, even receiving now with meekness his reflection on her Samaritan people about their "worshipping they know not what"—a declaration which at the earlier part of the interview she would have quickly resented, even as she did the fancied slight upon Jacob's well. But while this stranger is wise, he is not yet to her the highest authority. She perceives he is a prophet, but a prophet is not the original source of truth. And she has heard of one, sometime to appear among them, greater than a prophet. And so, musing over it, without disputing or rejecting, she says in effect, "Well, I can't tell what to think. It may all be as you say. I don't know. But some time, I know, Messias is to come, which is called Christ. When *he* is come he will tell us all things."

Oh, on the brink of what stupendous discovery is this poor woman, and she knows it not! So Mary was standing without the sepulcher weeping, because she knew not where they had taken her Lord. And then He, whom her soul loved, came and stood



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beside her and she did not know Him, but took Him for the gardener, until His own voice said, "Mary!" And likewise the disciples, out fishing all night, and rowing in to shore in the early dawn, saw a man on the bank, and even held converse with him, and "they knew not that it was Jesus," until John in his quicker instinct of love whispered to Peter, "It is the Lord!" Yes, said the woman, when Messiah comes he will make all these things plain. When he comes! She had not long to wait. Joseph in Pharoah's court about to disclose himself, caused every one to go out from him, and "there stood no man with him when he made himself known to his brethren," and when he overwhelmed them by his tender announcement, "I am Joseph!" Likewise Jesus had sent the disciples away, and there stood no one by when His gentle voice fell on the woman's ear, "I that speak unto thee am He!" I, a wayworn traveller, seeking rest at this well and dependent on your generosity for a drink of water, I am the Messiah!

And then what happened when the pure-faced Jesus stood revealed before the



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woman just awakened to penitence, and her soul going out after God? Did she shrink back and cry out as Peter once did, "depart from me O Lord for I am a sinful woman"? Or did she cast herself prostrate before him? Did she kiss the hem of his garment and bathe His feet with her penitential tears? There is no record given us. The Scriptures make no scene about it. But we will not do wrong if we indulge imagination here. I think we can read between the lines. Had not Jesus told the woman, at the outset of the interview, that if she knew who he was that said, "Give me to drink," she would ask of him, and that he would give her the living water? Well, the poor woman knows now who the mysterious stranger is, and assuredly, even as Jesus said she would do, she asks; and, assuredly, even as He said He would do, He gives the living water. Of course there was further conversation between them, for are we not told that the disciples, when they returned, found Him talking with the woman? And what words of comfort and instruction He must have spoken! What an unfolding of that grace which can come over the moun-

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tain of our iniquities, which in no wise casts out any seeking soul, and which can make the foulest clean! It was seed falling on prepared soil, and like showers which the earth eagerly drinks in. He who had first cast down now raises up. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart He does not despise. Yea, with such sacrifices God is ever well pleased. And for the woman old things had passed away. Behold all things were become new, and even as it is told afterwards of another sinful woman restored by the Saviour's grace, "Forgiven much, she loves much."

With the return of the disciples the woman takes up her own return to the city. She had come out from her home to draw water. But she found that at the well which she went not for; and so absorbed is she in her new thoughts, and so stirred by her new emotions, that she forgets the errand which had brought her there, and leaves her water-pot at the well, in her eagerness to carry home a better burden. And now we think of her hastening with speedy feet to bring the tidings, even as afterwards the women who received the angels' word at the door

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of the empty sepulchre, "departed quickly with fear and great joy, and did run to bring his disciples word." And to the men she saw in the fields, or on the roadside, as she went hurrying by, and to those of the town whom she eagerly accosted, she proclaimed the wonderful news, "Come, see a man"—and hesitating not in her message even though it was based on the fact of her discovered sin, "Come, see a man who told me all things that ever I did. Is not this the Christ?" And it is as if we heard over again Andrew's testimony to his brother Simon, "We have found the Messiah!" and likewise Philip's confident word to Nathaniel, "Come and see!" The woman's witnessing in her town proved indeed an evangel of power, for many of the people there believed on Him because of her saying, while afterwards many more going out of the city and coming to Him, still at the well, believed because of His own words, and declared in their joy "that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world."

In the meantime the disciples note that the food they had brought, and had spread

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before Him, remained untouched; and, knowing His weariness from the morning's journey, in their friendly anxiety they press it on Him—"Master, eat!" But the Master's thoughts were elsewhere. As before, he forgot his thirst for the water which the woman might have furnished, so now he has no hunger for the food which the disciples have brought. They in their dullness could not enter into those contemplations and spiritual sympathies which then absorbed His mind, and could only wonder, "hath any man brought Him aught to eat?" Their Master, however, is abundantly satisfied with good things, only His satisfaction is of another kind. He is "seeing of the travail of his soul and is satisfied." The thought of a poor lost one found and restored, the thought of the new-born joy among the angels in heaven over the one sinner that had repented, the thought of the spiritual fields right around Him "white already to the harvest," and of the many Samaritans of that city about to come out to Him and to believe on Him—all this satisfaction and joy of spirit is signified by His quiet answer to

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the disciples, "I have meat to eat which you know not of!"

One lone woman first came to this well-side, where sat the weary stranger, and she received at his hand the living water. Again the well is visited that same day, and many tread the path where but one had walked before. But it was not Jacob's well, nor its purity of water, that drew them there. It was the same sentiment surging in their hearts, which at another time found expression in the mouths of the Greeks who had come up to the feast at Jerusalem, "We would see Jesus!" And they believed because of His own word, and with joy drew water from the well of salvation.

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### IV.

To what wells are we bringing our pitchers for their filling? We have our earthly occupations and interests and satisfactions. That is right, but should that be all? The daily round of toils and pursuits, and it may be of pleasures, too, this will never satisfy the soul. Coming over and over to fill the pitcher with such water, no sooner drinking than we thirst again, the supply of to-day exhausted by to-morrow—what is this but to realize the prophet's wail, "Spending your money for that which is not bread and your labor for that which satisfieth not?" But hearken, now, to the proclamation of another well, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters." "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink."

Jesus sits to-day at the well of salvation, even as on that day He sat by the well of Samaria. And with stretched-out hand He asks, "Give me to drink"—son, daughter, give me thine heart. In the refusal to respond do we not catch His charitable judgment, "they know not what they

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do"? For, surely, even as the Lord said to the woman, if you only knew the gift of God, and if you only knew who it is that saith to you give me to drink—if men and women would but reflect and consider and realize—oh, surely they would turn and ask of Him, and He would give the living water.

"I heard the voice of Jesus say,  
Behold I freely give  
The living water—thirsty one  
Stoop down and drink and live.  
I came to Jesus and I drank  
Of that life-giving stream,  
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived  
And now I live in Him."







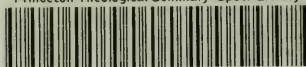
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